

Summer 2010

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Citation Details

Cesafsky, Laura Nicole, "Hopping mad : the metroscape has a tall, cold, crafty one" (2010 Metroscape, Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies, Portland State University)

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Hopping Mad:

Photo credit: David O'Conner

The metroscape has a tall, cold, crafty one

by Laura Cesafsky

Portland metropolitan area beer drinkers are a blessed lot. An evening at a neighborhood pub—or, for that matter, an hour at the Portland International Airport, an NBA basketball game at the Rose Garden in SE Portland, a round of golf at McMenamin's Edgefield in Troutdale—becomes an opportunity to imbibe from a selection of delicious, hand-crafted Oregon beers. According to the Oregon Brewers Guild, the metroscape has 38 craft breweries, more than any metropolitan area in the world. Even Munich cannot top that figure. Not surprisingly, then, metroscapers swill more craft beer than anyone else. When a local bartender reaches for a tap, an Oregon craft brew rains forth over 40% of the time. (Average craft beer consumption nationally? Four %.) Little wonder that for the epicurean crowd, the metroscape has earned an indulgent sobriquet: “Beervana.”

Craft brewing has been a success story for the region, creating jobs and drawing visitors at a time when urban economies are struggling for productive niches in a globalizing economy. Although craft brewing emerged in Portland over 25 years ago as part of a larger West Coast movement around quality food and beverages, its continued growth here reflects unique characteristics of place. As we move into July, officially Oregon Craft Beer Month, there is no better time to take a closer look at the development of the metroscape's distinctive beer culture. What we find is an industry that exhibits a healthy

synergy, linking city and country, production and consumption, and educational and cultural resources into a coherent craft niche with a significant economic impact.

Why All the Craft Brewing in Portland?

Millions of American adults came of age in an era when a bar's tap list began and ended with almost indistinguishable pilsners from Budweiser, Coors and Miller. For them, it perhaps seemed natural that beer should be a product much like another icon of the period, white bread: ubiquitous, uniform, unchanging, and more than a little boring. The rise of craft brewing—a national trend with Portland at its epicenter—amounts to an inversion in how Americans understand and appreciate beer. Craft brewers create beer in relatively small batches (sometimes at home), and measure their product against such novel indicators (novel in the American beer world, at least) as taste, uniqueness, creativity and seasonal appropriateness.

As quality ingredients have trumped, say, the advantages in transportation that long made Midwestern cities America's top beer suppliers, the Pacific Northwest has emerged as an ideal hub for brewing. This is because the astonishing variety of craft beers now on the market—from pale ales to porters—largely derive from four key ingredients: a starch source (traditionally, malted barley), a brewers' yeast, hops, and quality water. And three of those four—hops, barley and water—are regional specialties.



Photo credit: Wayne Photography

Oregon's mild climate is quite similar to the climate of Europe's beer-loving regions, and it is ideal for producing hops. According to the Oregon Hop Commission, Oregon is the second-largest hop-producing state in the nation behind neighboring Washington, growing 17 percent of the U.S. market share. Ten different varieties of hops are produced in the Willamette Valley alone. As craft brewers experiment with different hop varieties in search of unique bitterness levels and aromatic qualities, they provide an outlet for local hop growers. Indeed, the abundance of hops in the Pacific Northwest is linked the development of the region's signature beer, a super-hoppy ale with a bitterness more intense than most beer drinkers elsewhere are used to.

Although the majority of America's barley is still produced in the Midwest, Oregon's share is growing. In fact, one of the West Coast's largest suppliers of malted barley, Great Western Malting, is located right in Vancouver, Washington. Long a top supplier of malt to industrial-scale brewers both foreign and domestic, Great Western is expanding in response to growing demand from local brewpubs and microbreweries. The company's newest venture, Country Malt, specializes in the distribution of brewing materials and smaller quantities of malt and hops, all targeted at craft brewers.

Finally, not to be overlooked, there is the major ingredient of beer: water. Many local brewers and beer aficionados see the region's crisp, soft water as a huge asset. "We get all our water from Bull Run Reservoir on Mount Hood," explains Christian Ettinger, owner and brewmaster at Hopworks Urban Brewery in SE Portland. "Proximity to wonderful brewing ingredients like great water makes Portland kind of a natural fit. Brewing epicenters spring up where there is a population and

a need, but also where the resources are available."

The demand for craft brews really took off on the West Coast in the 1970s. It was part of the same counter-cultural outcry against industrial agriculture and microwavable dinners that wrought the slow food, organic, and "buy local" movements. At heart, all these movements illustrated a desire among a growing number of consumers to

understand the ingredient lists of the foods they ate, to understand where their food and beverages came from, and then to actually enjoy consuming them. "People in general were looking for things that had a broader variety of flavor or quality or localness," says Thomas Shellhammer, an Associate Professor in the Department of Food Science and Technology at Oregon State University who researches beer and brewing. "We saw it with baking and coffee roasting and a variety of different food items. The Pacific Northwest was taking its food processing more local. There was a neat synergy there across food and beverages."

In the Portland metropolitan area, the locally minded, Do-It-Yourself ethic that supported the development of the city's first craft breweries in the 1980s has only grown. The calls for "slow," "small" and "local" that animated earlier food trends have perhaps been subsumed by the new regional calling card, sustainability, but the spirit endures. As Karen Foley, the publisher of *Imbibe*, a Portland-based drinks magazine, notes, "Portland is a serious foodie town, pretty much like no other town I have seen, and foodies like to support things that are well crafted. At the same time, we are loyal to independents, so it all works out perfectly" for food and beverage artisans.

That loyalty was crucial for Mike Haines and Mike Kinion when they created Vertigo Brewing in Hillsboro in 2008. Like most craft brewers who "go pro," Haines and Kinion started out as homebrewers. They had, according to Haines, "toyed with the idea of opening a brewery for the last several years," while they were both working at Intel. "We had many people that had tried our homebrews over the last few years that wanted to know where they could buy them." So Haines and Kinion launched Vertigo on a tiny, one-barrel system (31 gallons at a time). In the months since,

they have been successful enough to launch an expansion project, an upgrade to seven barrels. “We do not expect to become a regional powerhouse like Widmer,” Haines says, referring to the local brewery, “but instead focus on keeping our beers the high quality they are while slowly growing our customer base.”

So what does it take to make a high quality craft brew? Access to quality ingredients is a good start. But it also takes a healthy dose of creativity and no small amount of science. As Shellhammer, the beer researcher at OSU, notes, “craft brewers are innovative, experimental—they challenge the rules.” This can mean toying with flavor-enhancing additives like basil, coffee or maple syrup. At the same time, there are basic rules to brewing that must be learned and rehearsed. And as it turns out, Oregon ranks among the few places where one can receive a thorough education in those brewing mechanics. The Department of Food Science and Technology at OSU offers one of only two fermentation science curricula in the U.S. with a strong focus in beer. (The other program is at the University of California, Davis). Many of the programs’ students have work at one of Portland’s craft breweries.

But OSU is not simply producing brewers. It is also churning out cutting-edge beer research, another key input into the flourishing regional brew economy. Shellhammer, for example, researches hops, attempting to assess the qualities of bitterness they produce, how they contribute to beer foam, and how they produce specific types of aromas in beer, among other questions. He also works on developing new varieties of aroma hops. Over the years, several of the popular hop varieties grown in the Willamette Valley, including Cascade, Nugget and Willamette, were in fact developed at Oregon State. Through these efforts, Oregon is emerging not only as a prime location for beer drinking, but also for “beer studying.” Just be careful trying to do both at the same time.

Liquid Culture, Liquid Asset

The watershed year for craft brewing in Portland was 1983, when the legislature passed a new law that permitted brewers to sell beer at the site of production. Almost overnight, the first generation of Portland breweries came online. Widmer, BridgePort and Portland Brewing began commercial operations in 1984, and McMenamins opened its first brewpub location, the Hillsdale Brewery & Public House in SW Portland, in 1985. Widmer, BridgePort and Portland Brewing have since become large-scale craft brewers with national

reach (Portland Brewing was purchased by Pyramid Brewery in 2004), while the McMenamins brewpub empire has grown to over fifty locations in Oregon and Washington. These breweries have often served as training grounds for emerging talent. When young brewers are ready to leave the nest, they will often open a new brewery, perpetuating the expansion of the industry.

It is an industry that is making a significant economic contribution. The Beer Institute, an industry research and advocacy group, estimates the economic impact of beer brewing in Oregon in 2008 at nearly \$300 million (the Institute does not calculate a figure for the Portland Metropolitan area alone). That number jumps to just over \$1 billion if the contribution of distribution and retailing are included. Brewing employed 548 Oregonians in 2008, many at family wage jobs; total beer-related employment was over 14,000.

But brewing does not simply create jobs. As urban growth increasingly depends on the capitalization of cultural resources, beer making is buoying an even bigger local industry: tourism. Travel Portland, a private, non-profit destination marketing organization for the Portland metropolitan area, makes much of brewing in its “pitch” for the city, which it promotes to potential visitors as nothing less than “the center of the beer universe.” At the same time, beer is being situated as one of a number of the city’s “liquid assets” that make the Metroscape a unique, well-hydrated epicurean playground.

According to Foley, the *Imbibe* publisher, the various liquid craft industries for which the metropolitan region is known—coffee, wine, beer and, most recently, fine liquors—are making Portland not simply a “Beervana” but, more expansively, a “drinks mecca.” It works out great for *Imbibe*, given that it is a magazine of “liquid culture.” “I love the fact that we are based here,” Foley says. *Imbibe* launched in 2006, just as, in Foley’s estimation, premium drinks started to take off in all realms. The magazine covers “the world of drinks: the culture, the people, the places, and the craft” from its Portland office. Given that Portland has so much liquid culture, it is a frequent subject and muse, Foley says, so that *Imbibe* projects the “drinks mecca” brand to its national and international audience.

Portland Walking Tours, for one, has picked up the development. It offers visitors an “epicurean excursion” through the city that highlights the finer points of what it dubs the city’s F.L.O.S.S. philosophy (Fresh, Local, Organic, Seasonable,



Photo credit: David O'Conner

and Sustainable) as well as Portland's ubiquitous "liquid assets" (including microbrews, wines, distilled spirits, coffees, teas, olive oils, handmade sodas and, yes, real rainwater).

For folks who cannot be bothered with tea and soda and the like, the summer season is still rife with beer-centric activity. The Oregon Brewers Festival is by far the largest event, held in late July. This year, it is expected to draw over 70,000 beer lovers from around the world to Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park—an estimated \$1.5 million boon for the city. The development of the Oregon Brewers Festival parallels the growth of the craft brew industry itself. Hailed by many as the nation's finest craft beer festival, the festival was created in 1987 by the heads of Portland's oldest microbreweries, Widmer, BridgePort, and Portland Brewing. At the time, according to the Oregon Brewers Festival, there were only 124 craft breweries in the United States; thirteen brewers participated. Today, there are over 1,400 American craft breweries, and 81 of them will be offering up their finest suds at this year's event.

While the Oregon Brewers Festival continues to swell, the smaller North American Organic Brewers Festival might be a better harbinger of where Metroscape brewing is going. Held annually in the last week of June (this year it is in North Portland's Overlook Park), the festival weds two of Portland's most vibrant industries: beer and sustainability. Designed to "raise awareness about organic beer and sustainable living," the festival features all organic beers and ciders from around the world, live music, organic food, and sustainability-oriented vendors.

Beer and sustainability: It's a combination that Ettinger, the Hopworks owner and brewmaster, is banking on to keep his business thriving amid an expanding ocean of competitors. Hopworks bills itself as the only 100 percent renewable energy brewery in the state of Oregon, and the only carbon-neutral brewery in the world (Ettinger purchases carbon offsets that fund reforestation projects in Colorado and Panama). For Ettinger, sustainability means taking pains to understand Hopworks "footprint" in every aspect, from serving all-certified organic beers to running the brewery's rigs on bio-diesel and recycled grease from the kitchen fryers. These efforts and more earned Hopworks a 2010 BEST Award from the City of Portland, an honor that recognizes businesses in the Metroscape that have demonstrated excellence in business practices that promote social equity, economic growth and environmental benefits.

For Ettinger, it just makes sense in this growing and dynamic beer market. "How do you set yourself apart in a sea of 80 brewers in the state and about 40 of those being in our backyard?" Ettinger wonders aloud. "We try to make the best pint of beer in the world. We work on differentiating ourselves in terms of quality. If you can do that sustainably, then you really carve out a pretty good niche for yourself." **M**

Laura Cesafsky holds a Masters of Urban Studies from Portland State University. She will begin the PhD program in Geography at the University of Minnesota in September.